

# 'I Must Decrease': Spiritual Direction and Power in the Orthodox Tradition

Alexis Torrance

I was prompted to present on the topic of power and spiritual direction by some words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann. They struck me, and have remained etched in my mind ever since: "there is nothing more frightening than the thirst for power over souls. It is the thirst of the anti-christ."<sup>1</sup> Schmemmann knew first-hand the kinds of distortions taking place under the name of Orthodoxy which this line evokes. Distortions, perhaps, should not be surprising. After all, if Lord Acton was right when he declared that "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,"<sup>2</sup> then the potential risks inherent in the ministry of spiritual direction in the Orthodox Church become clear. But this paper is not about the frequent and tragic abuse of spiritual authority and power in the history of Orthodoxy. I want rather to focus on one of the chief ways in which the Orthodox tradition has attempted to promote and protect the Christian integrity of the ministry of the spiritual father (and the spiritual mother), namely through the tactics of the director's self-abasement, humility, and love. These tactics, I submit, are an attempt at the subversion of models of power as they generally obtain in this world, after the example of, and for the sake of, Christ.

Since I am offering a bird's-eye view of a specific facet of the concept of spiritual direction, I should mention some of the places where a fuller view of spiritual direction in Eastern Christianity and the early church can be found. There are several important works which deal with the theme, including, for instance: I. Hausherr's *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East* (with the article prefacing the English edition by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware), John Chryssavgis' *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, and more recently George Demacopoulos' *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church*.<sup>3</sup> These are good

---

<sup>1</sup>Alexander Schmemmann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann, 1973-1983* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 312.

<sup>2</sup>J.E.E. Dalberg-Acton, *Letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 1887* cited in idem, *Essays on Freedom and Power* (Boston: Beacon Press: 1949), 364.

<sup>3</sup> See I. Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East* (CS 116; A. Hufstader, trans., [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991]); John Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press,

places to start to get a handle on the variety, depth, and breadth of the topic. The most concentrated and summative appraisals of the spiritual father's ministry in the source texts are St. John Climacus' *To the Shepherd* (7<sup>th</sup> century) and St. Symeon the New Theologian's *Epistle 1* (11<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>4</sup>

St. Paul, it is well-known, gave license to the language of spiritual paternity in Christ: "For though you have ten thousand instructors in Christ," he wrote to the Corinthians, "yet you have not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Wherefore I beseech you, be followers of me" (1 Cor 4:15-16). Paul's boldness here gives rise to an obvious risk, namely of justifying a cult of personality among spiritual leaders, leading in turn to an authoritarian, even tyrannical, relationship between spiritual father and child. But to read the passage in this way is to dangerously ignore the context. What prompts Paul's words here is the following:

Now you are full, now you are rich, you have reigned as kings without us: and I would to God you did reign, that we also might reign with you. For I think that God has set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are honorable, but we are despised. Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place; and labor, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: Being defamed, we entreat: we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day" (1 Cor 4:8-13).

Thus Paul, in setting himself up as a father to be followed, is doing so on the basis of a radical self-abasement, in which true discipleship and spiritual paternity in Christ are accomplished. St. John Climacus, seeing in Paul the model of discerning spiritual fatherhood, upholds his double

---

2000); and G. Demacopoulos, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> *The Shepherd* can be found in PG 88.1166-1209; there is an English translation in L. Moore, and Holy Transfiguration Monastery (trans.), *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Brookline, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1979), 231-50 (citations here will follow the numbering in the latter); an edition and translation of St. Symeon's *Epistle 1* can be found in H.J.M. Turner, ed. and trans., *The Epistles of St Symeon the New Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 26-69.

emphasis on self-abasement together with the dignity of the ministry seen here, when he writes: “The superior ought not always to humble himself unreasonably, nor should he always exalt himself senselessly, but he should take example from Paul in both instances.”<sup>5</sup>

The quest by Eastern Christian monasticism to ensure that spiritual directors conformed to an arduous Gospel and Pauline ideal of self-sacrificial love often comes across as one of its most urgent tasks. There is a continual warning, from the fourth to the present century, regarding self-proclaimed elders who have no grounding in ascetic Christian life. St. Nilus, for instance, writes the following,

Someone utterly unlearned in the work of God will dare to teach it, as if it were easier than the rest; and the thing most difficult to handle is viewed by many as being a snap. Saint Paul says that he by no means understands it, but they declare that they know all about it, who do not even know that they do not know. The monastic life has therefore fallen into contempt, and those who undertake it are ridiculed by everyone. Certainly, who would not ridicule someone who yesterday carried water in a tavern, but is viewed today as a master of virtue surrounded by a retinue of disciples? Or someone who has returned from villainy in the morning, proudly advancing toward the market place at night with a crowd of disciples? If they were truly convinced that leading others to piety is difficult work and that such toil entails danger, they would decline this occupation as being too much for them. But since indeed they do not know this, they believe that it is glorious to rule over somebody, and they easily fall into the deep pit. They are of the opinion that leaping into this furnace is easy. They arouse laughter in those who know the life they led yesterday, and the indignation of God, at such temerity.<sup>6</sup>

If there is any trace of a desire to “rule over somebody,” as St. Nilus puts it, then the ministry is endangered. And in order to be rid of any such desire, extreme humility is necessary. For a sense of what this might mean in practice, we need only look to Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, two elders in the sixth century who lived in utter solitude, communicating with their interlocutors only by letter (of which,

---

<sup>5</sup> *To the Shepherd* 38.

<sup>6</sup> St. Nilus, *Liber de monastica exercitatione*, 23 PG 79.749C-52A.

thankfully, around 850 survive).<sup>7</sup> In a very real way, they cut themselves off from many of the temptations to lord it over their disciples: they never saw their disciples face to face. They had no access at all, moreover, to some of the most basic relational components that most spiritual directors, priests, ministers, psychologists and so on take for granted, and which can contribute for good or ill to the dynamic of a relationship: the sound of the voice, pitch, the movement of the eyes, body language, clothing, demeanor, and so on. Perhaps in part due to this lack of direct physical contact with their disciples, Barsanuphius and John were resistant to any idea of control over them. Their letters display a general aversion to giving precise prescriptions to their interlocutors concerning progress in the spiritual life.

To one brother who seeks for a strict rule as to how he should order his life, Barsanuphius responds that seeking for such rules is like embarking on a path of ever-expanding circles, when the route is narrow and concisely laid out: “let go of the rules of men,” he orders, “and listen to Christ who says, ‘he who endures to the end will be saved’ (Mt 10:22).”<sup>8</sup> This principle recurs throughout the correspondence, whereby the inquirer ought not to feel bound by rules, but be carefree, even when a specific recommendation is given (*Letters* 51, 56, 85, 87, etc.). John gives the reasoning behind such a policy: “we do not give any commandments in order not to afflict anyone.”<sup>9</sup> What they were aiming for in their disciples was not a slavish and minute adherence to an intricate code of conduct, but an ever-growing association with the virtues (most especially humility, patience, obedience, mourning, and thanksgiving), and so with Christ. The solitude of the two old men was precisely a tactic to “decrease” themselves, and “increase” Christ in their disciples.

Of course, such a tactic cannot be applied universally and most spiritual directors in Eastern Christianity have not gone to such an extreme. However, there is a truth about the self-negating approach of Barsanuphius and John which applies to the wider tradition of spiritual direction in the East. In his treatise on the pastor, St. John Climacus mentions the element of self-effacement as follows: “It belongs particularly to the man who has obtained mercy from God to be able to

---

<sup>7</sup> On Barsanuphius and John, see J.L. Hevelone-Harper, *Disciples of the Desert: Monks, Laity, and Spiritual Authority in the Sixth-Century* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), and A. Torrance, ‘Standing in the Breach: the Significance and Function of the Saints in the Letters of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza,’ *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17.3 (2009): 459-73.

<sup>8</sup> *Letter* 23.14-5 (SC 426.210).

<sup>9</sup> *Letter* 743.8-9 (SC 468.186).

benefit the sick in a manner that is unobserved and hidden from them; by this he accomplishes two most excellent things: he preserves himself from the glory of men (rust, as it is called), and he incites those who have received mercy to give thanks to God alone.”<sup>10</sup> Again, the concern is to deflect attention from oneself, shunning vainglory (even if this means being completely unobserved and unnoticed by the disciple), in order to bring souls closer to God.

This humble attitude carries over in discussions of a disciple’s disobedience or sin. Rather than rebuke the disciple with anger or harshness when he repents, the texts mostly propose grieving over the fall and compassionately restoring him. Thus Climacus can say, “a fox found in the company of hens is an unseemly sight, but nothing is more unseemly than an enraged shepherd.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, one of the sayings from the desert fathers relates how Abba Apollo teaches a spiritual director who is harsh with his repentant disciple that he must be gentle and compassionate. He does this by praying for the temptations assaulting the disciple to be redirected towards the director, which teaches the latter a lesson (this re-direction of temptations from disciple to director is a common trope, incidentally, but it normally does not take place at the instigation of a third party).<sup>12</sup> Again, St. Maximus the Confessor explains that the spiritual father who sees a disciple fall into self-esteem at having attained some spiritual knowledge should “grieve compassionately on seeing him die,” with the aim of leading him to repentance.<sup>13</sup> This notion of grief for one’s disciple lies at the heart of concepts of sponsorship (*anadoche*) in spiritual direction, developed by ascetics such as St. Mark the Monk, St. John Climacus, and St. Symeon the New Theologian.<sup>14</sup> Without dwelling on the notion in detail, it is clear that by proposing a radical self-sacrifice of the spiritual director on behalf of his disciples (where he “stands surety” for his disciples in all things), the concept of the director decreasing himself for the sake of others is again brought to the fore. It amounts to another attempt at

---

<sup>10</sup> *To the Shepherd* 53.

<sup>11</sup> *To the Shepherd* 48.

<sup>12</sup> *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* under Apollos: see N. Russell and B. Ward, trans., *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (CS 34; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 76.

<sup>13</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, *Third Century of Various Texts* 59 in G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K.T. Ware, trans., *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. 2 (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 225.

<sup>14</sup> On this issue, see in particular K.T. Ware’s article, ‘The Spiritual Father in Saint John Climacus and Saint Symeon the New Theologian,’ which serves as the foreword to Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction*, vii-xxxiii.

safeguarding the ministry from distortions (though even here, St. John Climacus warns of the danger of trying to stand surety on behalf of others in a proud way, which only leads to the censure, “Physician, heal yourself” [cf. Lk. 4:23]).<sup>15</sup>

The concern to safeguard the ministry of spiritual direction from the trappings of power is shot through discussions and definitions of the spiritual father in ascetic literature. We have mentioned general aspects of self-negation and humble self-sacrifice as being the surest safeguards, but more specifically, this humility should manifest itself through the director’s (often silent) self-condemnation as a greater sinner than his disciple. Consider St. Symeon the New Theologian’s definition of the spiritual father: he is “someone who examines himself diligently, and discovers that he is free of all desire for glory, without any trace of pleasure or of cupidity pertaining to the body, free of avarice and resentment, perfectly meek, unaware of anger; someone who is kindled by love and desire, even to tears, at the mere mention of the name of Christ, and who is, moreover, in mourning instead of his brothers and weighs the sins of others as his own, while he reckons himself wholeheartedly as the greater sinner.”<sup>16</sup> Here we have an emphasis on the prerequisite of a pure life, but this is crowned by the director’s sense of personal repentance as a “greater sinner” than the disciple. Similarly, St Theodore the Studite insists on considering himself the least of men while hearing confessions, “not because of humility,” he says, “but because it is true.”<sup>17</sup> By truthfully and wholeheartedly putting himself below the disciple, the director is effectively destroying the temptations of power with one blow.

In these last few pages, let me turn to the discussion of the spiritual father by St. Peter of Damascus (12<sup>th</sup> century) in his rich *Treasury of Divine Knowledge*.<sup>18</sup> As with the other texts cited, he is concerned to underline the need for the director to deflect any sense of personal authority and power over others. In this context he mentions the importance of the spiritual father having once been in obedience himself: “those who, after being subject to a spiritual father, were then appointed by him to take charge of other brethren, carried out their task as if they were themselves still under obedience, keeping the traditions of their

---

<sup>15</sup> *The Shepherd* 73.

<sup>16</sup> St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Epistle* 1, cited in Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction*, 127-8.

<sup>17</sup> St. Theodore the Studite, *Epistles*, cited in Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction*, 68.

<sup>18</sup> A translation may be found in G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K.T. Ware, trans., *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. 3 (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 74-210 (page numbers below refer to this translation).

own spiritual fathers.”<sup>19</sup> This sense of simply continuing another’s work is again an attempt to decrease the spiritual father’s ego and safeguard the ministry. Moreover, this kind of spiritual father “is in a position to advise, not everyone, but at least those who seek him out voluntarily and who question him by their own choice; for he has learned things in their true order. It is because of his humility, and because his questioners seek him out voluntarily, that what he says is stamped on the soul of his listeners.”<sup>20</sup> This insistence on only advising those who explicitly and honestly ask for guidance is important. It reflects, St. Peter explains, the humility of Christ, who “does not constrain anyone.”<sup>21</sup> This is the same point made by Sts. Barsanuphius and John.

St. Peter of Damascus goes on to warn against directors who try to elicit conversation from their disciples: “the disciple, forced by his supposed teacher to speak against his will, feels ashamed and tells lies, pretending that he wants to do good; and the teacher also acts deceitfully, flattering his disciple in order to discover what is hidden in his mind, and in general employing every kind of trick and speaking at length.”<sup>22</sup> The desire to initiate or take the first step in the process of spiritual guidance, and to speak verbosely about spiritual matters is a dangerous step according to St. Peter, and puts spiritual guidance on a track alien to the Christian tradition:

We should not, out of self-esteem, presumptuously teach those who do not express the wish to hear us either through their actions or through their fervent faith. While we are still subject to the passions we should not do this even if we feel we have the authority to do so. Rather, as the fathers have said, unless questioned by the brethren we should not say anything by way of giving help, so that any benefit is a consequence of their own free choice. Both St. Paul and St. Peter followed this principle (cf. Philem. 14; 1 Pet 5:2); and St. Peter adds that we should not lord it over the members of our flock but be an example to them...Similarly, it is said in the *Gerontikon* that unless questioned by the brethren the fathers said nothing that might contribute to the soul’s salvation; they regarded unsolicited advice as vain chatter. This is quite right; for it is because we

---

<sup>19</sup> St. Peter of Damascus, *A Treasury of Divine Knowledge: Introduction*, 87.

<sup>20</sup> *A Treasury of Divine Knowledge: On Building Up the Soul Through the Virtues*, 183.

<sup>21</sup> *A Treasury of Divine Knowledge: On Building Up the Soul Through the Virtues*, 183.

<sup>22</sup> *A Treasury of Divine Knowledge: The Great Value of Love and of Advice Given With Humility*, 185.

think that we know more than others that we speak unbidden. And the more we are guilty of this, the greater the freedom before God we assume we possess, although the closer the saints draw to God, the more they regard themselves as sinners, as St. Dorotheos says; they [the saints] are astounded by the knowledge of God that they have been granted and are reduced to helplessness.”<sup>23</sup>

We have seen in a broad way that the Eastern Christian tradition has attempted over the course of its history to promote safeguards against the temptations of power inherent in the ministry of spiritual direction. These safeguards include some or all of physical isolation, a spirit of self-sacrifice, meekness rather than anger, compassion rather than harshness, the need for the director’s own experience of obedience, and the director’s placing himself below the disciple. These are all instances, in the end, of humility, which serves as the guiding virtue for the protection of this inspired ministry.

This ministry continues, by the grace of God, to this day, despite the atrocities of some who usurp it for their own ends. Such usurpation sadly continues as well, as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann knew only too well. But to dwell on the miracle of its continuing presence in our broken world, and to fight for the preservation of this miracle, seems a better task to undertake than to be preoccupied with the ugliness that can occur. At the same time, a warning must remain against the gravity of abusing this ministry, an abuse rightly equated by Fr. Alexander with the power of the antichrist. Let me end, then, with a word from St. Peter of Damascus on this matter:

St. John of Damascus says that he who brazenly tries to assume this status [of spiritual father] of his own accord is condemned. For if those who shamelessly assume high office without royal authorization are severely punished, how much more so are those who audaciously take charge of what is God’s without receiving His call? This is especially so if out of ignorance or pride they think that such an awesome task involves no danger of condemnation, imagining that it will bring them honor or ease, and not realizing that they will rather be required, when the moment comes, to enter into an abyss of humility and death for the sake of their spiritual children and their enemies. For this is

---

<sup>23</sup> *A Treasury of Divine Knowledge: The Great Value of Love and of Advice Given With Humility*, 186.



what was done by the holy apostles— who were to the highest degree compassionate and wise— when they taught others.<sup>24</sup>

Spiritual direction, in order to be Christian, must pre-eminently reflect the humility and self-giving love of the Master, Christ himself. This is the simple lesson against the temptations of power that the Church has bequeathed, and must continue to bequeath, to her spiritual directors.

---

<sup>24</sup> *A Treasury of Divine Knowledge: Spurious Knowledge*, 196.